

Permanency

Achieving permanency for all children and increasing stability of placement for children in out-of-home care are our foremost goals in speaking to permanency for Washington's children. Every child needs to have a permanent family to grow and thrive. To achieve this we must emphasize and enhance maintaining connections with the child's birth and extended families, with their home and school communities and with their cultural heritage and community. This commitment to permanency creates the stability and security necessary for optimum emotional, physical, psychological and educational growth and advancement.

Permanency must also be seen as an array of options we create and access for a child in a community. Not every child will be able to be raised in their family home and by their parent(s). However, when a child is being cared for by relatives or foster care providers, they must have opportunities to maintain ties to parents, siblings, neighborhoods, and other people and places important to them. These permanency "markers" for children become essential in creating a sense of self and in understanding their own personal and familial history.

Permanency and stability in placement must be built around outcomes; positive outcomes that support children receiving what they need to grow and thrive. A recent report refers to the "high cost of foster care placement" not in terms of dollars, but in terms of the social and psychological costs to children who are placed in foster care and separated from their world of parents, kin, and community.

Several of the goals we are committed to include:

- Children can return home and be safe in that home. When it is time for reunification, children are ready to go home and families are ready to welcome children home (assuring that safety and supports are in place so that the reunification will be successful). This is in direct response to the need to show improvement on the high rate of foster care re-entries.
- Thorough safety assessments (making full use of the Kids Come First tools, Transition and Safety Plans) will be completed prior to a child leaving placement to assure that the level of risk is properly assessed and safety plans are in place. If a child cannot return home safely, we must proceed to come back together as a team of decision-makers and re-evaluate the decision for the child to leave placement, or renegotiate the plan for the child.
- Families will have timely access to the services required to address the conditions and factors noted in the plans and the assessments.

- Maintaining and enhancing placement options for children, including resource family recruitment for foster and adopt placements, and maintaining our low rates of institutional placement of children.

In response to creating this diverse menu of permanency goals for our system, we are focused on these additional challenges: enhancing the stability of foster care placements, achieving a permanency goal for each child, enhancing the reunification of children and the use of guardianship or legally permanent placement with relatives. Also we are committed to strategies which show promise in increasing the number of adoptions and enhancing adoption services, building and maintaining permanence for those children in planned permanent living arrangements, developing a new Child Welfare Service (CWS) model, and addressing the disproportionate number of children of color in our foster care system.

In order to address these goals and challenges, some of the major strategies we will pursue are:

Engagement to Support Permanency:

Engaging relatives, fathers, tribes and communities early and often as effective resources gives us additional options to pursue in making reasonable efforts and planning reunification strategies for the child. This will also give us an earlier opportunity to assess relatives as placement options for children, when children cannot return to the care of their parents, and to build plans together with families to address safety and permanency from the beginning of the case.

Revising the Child Welfare Services (CWS) Model:

The planned revisions include creating a new in-home and voluntary child welfare services track to serve families who have been referred through Child Protective Services. Creating these services will enhance our ability to work with parents and children together in the home at an earlier moment in time which may reduce the need to place the child in a setting outside the home.

Reducing Multiple Placements of Children in Care:

Multiple placements create multiple separations for children impacting their well-being and feelings of security. We will employ the following strategies to reduce the number of multiple placements children experience: focusing on strengthening our capacity for identification of placement options; better matching for placement decisions; early family involvement to identify familial placement resources and in decision-making; creating early opportunities for an exchange of information between parents and resource parents; and providing additional supports for resource families. are strategies we will employ to reduce the number of multiple placements children experience. The recommendations of the Multiple Placement Workgroup has informed our work in this area and

provided a broad array of strategies we can use to lower the number of placements and lessen the impact of multiple placements. Also, prior to disruptions or upon indication of a disruption, a Family Team Decision-making Meeting will be convened to discuss the issues at hand. Data from *Family To Family* sites around the country have demonstrated the success of these meetings prior to placement disruption as a strategy that enhances placement stability.

Increasing Support Services:

Support services and resource centers will be established for post-guardianship and post-adoption services to support care providers with the challenges of parenting and in maintaining the care of children living with them. We anticipate this includes new financial supports for guardians as well as access to an array of services for both guardians and adoptive (resource) parents.

Implementing Program Strategies to Address Permanency:

Central to achieving our desired outcomes will be attending to program strategies that will increase placement stability and reduce multiple placements for children in care. Some of the strategies are developing and providing respite services and creative respite options in the community to create support for caregivers, including emergency respite to preserve placements; and facilitating special staffings to prevent disruptions. We will also look at best practice options to achieve better outcomes in identifying and matching placements for children and use data to assist with developing a deeper understanding of present outcomes to strategize on how we move to desired outcomes.

Increased recruitment for specialized adoptive parents is necessary. This will include recruitment within extended family networks, locating and recruiting resource families in the communities and neighborhoods where children are coming into care, in other identified neighborhoods and in schools, and will emphasize child-specific recruitment, where appropriate.

We will sharpen our commitment to address the disproportionate number of children of African American, Latino, and Native American heritage in the foster care system by implementing new services and strategies directed at identifying placement and permanency resources through an IV-E waiver. In addition, we will strategize on ways to create community partnerships to address the needs of this group of children and their kin.

Increasing the number of legal risk placements we make assures early permanency and stability for those children who can be identified upon early entry as potentially benefiting from adoption or another planned long-term custodial option. Shortening the timeframe it takes to move a child through the legal and adoptive process to finalization will give us permanency for these

children in a more timely way. The Unified Home Study process, now underway, should provide an important resource for achieving this outcome.

Children who have been in the system over two years will have a Permanency Staffing. A multi-disciplinary team with community representation will evaluate options, review file data and the plan for permanence to determine what it will take to get the child into a permanent home/placement.

For children who are going to move into legal adulthood while in, or shortly after leaving placement, we will pursue options to support permanency and maintain connections within the context of a family whenever possible and with the assistance of mentors. We will accomplish this by creating options that allow us to continue to serve these young adults with support and transition services, including continued placement, mentoring, educational, behavioral and social supports through age twenty-one. This will assist youth in continuing to move into adulthood with more positive results and outcomes than research and data currently indicate. This challenge will require creative thinking and ambitious stretch goals to encourage the traditional system to think beyond current service and resource parameters to meet the challenge of providing permanency for young adults seeking both connection and autonomy.

Participating in Court Improvement Plan activities is aimed at improving outcomes for safety and permanency where they are impacted by court system interfaces such as reducing continuances; stabilizing rotation of commissioners and judges in family court; and supporting family drug courts as an avenue for doing strong permanency and family engagement work.

Promote Relationship Building between Birth Parents and Resource Family Caregivers:

Facilitating early birth parent/foster parent or relative meetings (“handshake” meetings) focused on the child’s needs, routines, patterns of living and behaviors can reduce the trauma of removal and placement for a child and parent(s). This early conversation will assist in building relationships between parents and resource family care providers and creates a more seamless delivery of services and care in meeting a child’s needs and adjustment at a very difficult time in the child’s life.

Parent and relative involvement in the process is crucial and should be early and often. Research has shown that this is not only crucial in maintaining the bond between the child and the parent/relative, it is crucial to the child’s overall well-being. Involvement must include a range of activity from finding/locating all parent(s), finding relatives who have a connection to the child(ren), giving all parties access to the placement and decision-making processes and meaningful opportunities to maintain contact with the child. It also includes supporting them through this process with what it will take to

maintain or strengthen relationships and providing what it will take to get them to the next step in the plan for the child.

As with child safety, the work of creating and committing to the permanency needs of a child requires the resources and participation of many facets of the community. Partnerships are crucial to achieving the desired outcomes of permanency and stability for children in the child welfare system. Identified partnerships with families and relatives (again, early and often) to participate in team decisions concerning the care of the child; with providers to facilitate access to services identified in the individualized service plan to help the parent(s) work towards getting their child(ren) home; with Tribes to assure that we have involved all the resources that the Tribe can offer in planning and supporting Tribal connections for children and families can lead us to these outcomes. We also need to partner with communities to assure that our placement and reunification resources are culturally competent and community-rich to maintain important connections for children to their communities, neighborhoods, and traditions; and finally with courts and legal partners to reduce the time of legal process for children who need involvement of the court to both plan for and create permanency options.

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